

SMALL VEHICLE HAVING FUEL CELL WITH DAMAGE PROTECTIONRelated cases

[0001] This application is based on and claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application 60/430,191 filed December 2, 2002, the entire contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

Background of the InventionField of the Invention

[0002] The invention is directed to an electric motor-operated vehicle using a fuel cell. Specifically, the invention relates to the layout of components associated with a fuel cell on the frame of an electric motor-operated vehicle.

Description of the Related Art

[0003] Electric motor-operated vehicles having fuel cells are well known in the art. Some of such conventional electric motor-operated vehicles are golf carts or other simple vehicles for carrying objects.

[0004] In such conventional vehicles, the fuel cell, fuel tanks and related components are mounted on the frame of the vehicle body. However, the layout of the components inefficiently uses space, thus disallowing the use of tanks with increased capacity, and does not adequately protect the components from external forces. Additionally the piping layout in such conventional vehicles is not compact nor has sufficient strength.

Summary of the Invention

[0005] As noted above, conventional electric motor-operated vehicles with fuel cells use a layout of components that inefficiently uses space and does not allow the use of tanks with increased capacity, nor provides adequate protection against external forces. Accordingly, one aspect of at least one embodiment of the present invention is the recognition that the layout of the fuel cell and related components in an electric motor-operated vehicle can be compact and protect the components from external forces. Therefore, in at least one embodiment, the electric motor-operated vehicle efficiently uses the space in the vehicle body to accomplish a compact layout of the fuel cell and related components, securely hold the components on the vehicle body, and protect the components against external forces.

[0006] As also noted above, the piping layout of conventional electric motor-operated vehicles with fuel cells is not compact nor has sufficient strength. Accordingly, another aspect of at least one embodiment of the present invention is the recognition that the piping layout of an electric motor-operated vehicle can be compact and have sufficient strength. Therefore, in at least one embodiment, the electric motor-operated vehicle comprises a piping system has a compact layout with sufficient strength.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0007] Figure 1 is a top view of an electric motor-operated vehicle according to a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0008] Figure 2 is a side view of the electric motor-operated vehicle illustrated in Figure 1, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0009] Figure 3 is a front view of the electric motor-operated vehicle illustrated in Figure 1, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0010] Figure 4 is a rear view of the electric motor-operated vehicle illustrated in Figure 1, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0011] Figure 5 is a perspective view of a vehicle body frame, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0012] Figure 6 is a top view of the vehicle body frame illustrating the routing of wires, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0013] Figure 7 is a top plan view of the layout of components, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0014] Figure 8 is a side plan view of the layout of components, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0015] Figure 9 is an oblique view of a partition wall, in accordance with the electric motor-operated vehicle illustrated in Figure 7.

[0016] Figure 10 is a cross-sectional view of the layout of batteries and fuel tanks, in accordance with the electric motor-operated vehicle illustrated in Figure 7.

[0017] Figure 11 is a cross-sectional view of a partition wall having a movable cover, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0018] Figure 12a is a top plan view of a layout of a fuel tank and batteries, in accordance with another embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0019] Figure 12b is a side plan view of a layout of a fuel tank and batteries, in accordance with another embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0020] Figure 13 is a diagram of a piping system, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0021] Figure 14 is a top plan view of a layout of the piping system illustrated in Figure 13, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0022] Figure 15 is a cross-sectional view of the layout of the piping system illustrated in Figure 13, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0023] Figure 16 is a top plan view of a fuel cell drainpipe, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0024] Figure 17 is a side plan view of the fuel cell drainpipe illustrated in Figure 16, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0025] Figure 18 is a top plan view of a layout of the piping system illustrated in Figure 13, in accordance with a second preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0026] Figure 19 is a top plan view of a third preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0027] Figure 20 is a side plan view of a third preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0028] Figure 21 is a top plan view of a fourth preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0029] Figure 22 is a side plan view of a fourth preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0030] Figure 23 is top plan view of a fifth preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

[0031] Figure 24 is a side plan view of a fifth preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

[0032] In the following description, reference is made to the accompanying drawings, which form a part hereof, and which show, by way of illustration, specific

embodiments in which various aspects and features of the invention may be practiced. Where possible, the same reference numbers are used throughout the drawings and the following description to refer to the same or like components among the embodiments.

[0033] With reference to Figures 1 to 4, an electric motor-operated vehicle 1 generally comprises a vehicle body 2 having a front end, a rear end, a left side and a right side. The front and rear ends define a vehicle length along a longitudinal axis extending between the ends, while the right and left sides define a vehicle width along a transverse axis extending between the sides. As used herein, right, left, front, and rear are defined according to the perspective of a user operating the vehicle 1 and do not have any meaning independent of the user's perspective.

[0034] The vehicle 1 also comprises a plurality of wheels and at least one seat 3 disposed centrally along the vehicle length and vehicle width on the vehicle body 2. The at least one seat 3 preferably connects to the vehicle body 2. In the illustrated embodiment, the vehicle 1 comprises two seats 3. The vehicle 1 also comprises a steering wheel 4 disposed in front of the seat 3. In the illustrated embodiment, the plurality of wheels includes two front wheels 5 connected to each other by an axle (not shown) and disposed beneath the vehicle body 2. A front cowl 6 covers a space above the front wheels 5, the cowl 6 preferably having a depressed central surface.

[0035] The vehicle 1 further comprises a plurality of main frame rails 7 disposed beneath the vehicle body 2, and extending from the front end to the rear end of the vehicle body 2. In the illustrated embodiment, the plurality of main frame rails 7 comprises two rails 7 disposed at the right and left sides of the vehicle body 2. The main frame rails 7 are preferably made of pipe material having sufficient strength, such as, but without limitation, steel. In the illustrated embodiment, the plurality of wheels also includes two rear wheels 8 connected to each other by an axle (not shown) and disposed beneath the vehicle body 2. The vehicle also comprises a loading platform 9 configured to hold at least one object and a vehicle body cowl 10 disposed over the right and left sides of the vehicle body 2 and over a lower front side below the seat 3. Further, side frame rails 11 are disposed outside at least a portion of the main frame rails 7.

[0036] With reference to Figure 5, a vehicle body frame 2a in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0037] According to the illustrated embodiment, a cross member 12 connects the main frame rails 7 to each other at the rear end of the vehicle body frame 2a. Brackets

13 also connect to each main frame rail 7 at the rear end of the vehicle body frame 2a. A loading platform receiving frame 14, comprising a left side rail 14a and a right side rail 14b, is disposed above the side frame rails 11 and connects to the main frame rails 7. The side rails 14a, 14b also connect to the brackets 13. The loading platform receiving frame 14 is preferably a three-sided frame. Again, right side and left side are defined relative to the perspective of a user operating the vehicle 1, as described above. A plurality of struts 15 connect the main frame rails 7 to the loading platform receiving frame 14, and are configured to secure the receiving frame 14 to the main frame rails 7. The struts 15 preferably connect to a front portion and a middle portion of the receiving frame 14, as shown in the illustrated embodiment. At least one floor plate 16 is disposed in front of the receiving frame 14 over the main frame rails 7. In the illustrated embodiment, two floor plates 16 are shown.

[0038] With reference to Figure 6, the routing of wires in a vehicle body frame 2a in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0039] A brake pedal 17 is disposed on the floor plate 16 toward the front of the vehicle body frame 2a. The brake pedal 17 connects to a right front wheel brake cable 18, a left front wheel brake cable 19, a right rear wheel brake cable 20 and a left rear wheel brake cable 21. The brake pedal 17 is configured to receive a brake force input from the user. The cables 18, 19, 20, 21 in turn connect, and are configured to transmit the brake force input, to a right front wheel (not shown), a left front wheel (not shown), a right rear wheel (not shown) and a left rear wheel (not shown), respectively.

[0040] An acceleration pedal (not shown) is also disposed on the front plate 16 toward the front of the vehicle body frame 2a. The acceleration pedal connects to a throttle cable 22 and is configured to receive a throttle input from the user. The throttle cable 22 connects to an electric motor (not shown) and is configured to transmit the throttle input from the acceleration pedal to the electric motor. A shift cable 23 is also disposed on the vehicle body frame 2a and is configured for use in switching the operation of the vehicle 1 between a forward and a reverse motion.

[0041] With reference to Figures 7 and 8, a layout of components, in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0042] An amplifier 24 is removably disposed on the front cowl 6 above the main frame rails 7, preferably on the depressed central surface of the front cowl 6. At least one fuel tank 25 is disposed behind the seat 3, preferably between a raised portion of the right and left main frame rails 7. The seat 3 is disposed above the loading platform receiving frame 14. In the illustrated embodiment, the at least one fuel tank 25 includes two hydrogen fuel tanks 25. The fuel tanks 25 have a front end and a rear end that define a longitudinal axis extending between the ends, and that face the front end and rear end of the vehicle body 2, respectively. The fuel tanks 25 are preferably oriented such that the longitudinal axis of the fuel tanks 25 is generally parallel to the longitudinal axis of the vehicle body 2. The fuel tanks 25 are also preferably removably mounted on a plurality of base seats 26, which are preferably disposed at the longitudinal ends of the fuel tanks 25. The base seats 26 can also optionally extend along the length of the fuel tanks 25. The base seats 26 are configured to receive and securely hold the fuel tanks 25, and to prevent the longitudinal and lateral displacement of the tanks 25.

[0043] The vehicle 1 comprises at least one battery 27. In the illustrated embodiment, four batteries 27 are shown. The batteries 27 are preferably disposed longitudinally on either side of the fuel tanks 25. Each battery 27 is removably mounted between the right or left side rails 14a, 14b of the loading platform receiving frame 14 and the fuel tanks 25.

[0044] At least one partition wall 28 is preferably disposed between the batteries 27 and the fuel tanks 25. Two partition walls 28 are shown in the illustrated embodiment. The partition walls 28 can be made, for example, but without limitation, of a plastic material, a steel sheet or other sheet metal. The partition walls 28 are configured to strengthen the vehicle body frame 2a, protect the fuel tanks 25, and protect and guide airflow to the batteries 27.

[0045] In the illustrated embodiment, a fuel cell holder 29 is disposed in front of the fuel tanks 25, under the seat 3, and over the main frame rails 7. The fuel cell holder 29 is further disposed under the loading platform receiving frame 14. The fuel cell holder 29 has a right and left lateral end generally perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the vehicle body 2 and is configured to receive and hold a fuel cell unit 30 removably disposed therein. The fuel cell unit 30 optionally comprises a fan 31, which is preferably disposed at the bottom of the fuel cell unit 30 and is configured to generate airflow over the fuel cell unit 30 to cool the unit 30. Each of the right and left lateral ends of the fuel

cell holder 29 define an opening configured to receive a filter 32 and to allow air flow into the fuel cell holder 29. The filters 32 are removably connected to said openings.

[0046] A partition wall 33 is disposed between the fuel cell holder 29 and the fuel tanks 25 and is configured to, among other things, protect the fuel cell unit 30 disposed thereunder. The partition wall 33 preferably has an inverted L-shape cross-section, as illustrated in Figure 9. The partition wall 33 can be made, for example, but without limitation, of a plastic material, a steel sheet or other sheet metal. As illustrated in Figure 9, the partition wall 33 comprises a top wall 33a and a vertical wall 33b. The partition wall 33 preferably also comprises a vent opening 34 formed on the upper central portion of the vertical wall 33b. The vent opening 34 is configured to allow airflow therethrough from the fuel cell holder 29.

[0047] Air intake openings 35 are formed on the vehicle body cowl 10 below the seat 3 and in front of the batteries 27. The intake openings 35 are configured to allow airflow, as illustrated by arrows A1 and A2 in Figure 7, under the seat 3 and onto the batteries 27. Covers (not shown) are removably attached to the air intake openings 35. The covers can comprise, for example, but without limitation, a louver or labyrinth structure to prevent water or other foreign material from entering the intake openings 35.

[0048] An electric motor 36 configured to propel the vehicle 1 is disposed rearward of the fuel tanks 25 under the loading platform receiving frame 14. An electric motor control unit (MCU) 37 is disposed rearward of the electric motor 36, which advantageously decreases a thermal effect on the MCU 37 from the fuel cell unit 30. The MCU 37 is configured to control the operation of the electric motor 36.

[0049] With reference to Figure 10, a cross-section of the layout of the batteries 27 and fuel tank 25 in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0050] A plurality of receiving platforms 38 connect to and extend outward from the main frame rails 7. Each platform 38 defines a face generally parallel to a riding surface of the vehicle 1, and is configured to receive a battery 27 removably disposed thereon. Fittings 39 are removably and adjustably connected to the base seats 26 and configured to secure the fuel tanks 25 to the base seats 26.

[0051] With reference to Figure 11, a modification to the partition wall 33 between the fuel cell holder 29 and the fuel tanks 25 is illustrated therein.

[0052] In the illustrated embodiment, a movable cover 40 is removably connected to the face of the vertical wall 33b that faces the fuel tanks 25, proximal to the vent opening 34. The movable cover 40 is configured to move in response to a force between an open position (dotted line) and a plurality of deflecting positions (solid line), as illustrated by arrow C. While in the open position, the airflow is directed straight toward the rear end of the vehicle body 2, as indicated by arrow E. Conversely, while in one of the plurality of deflecting positions, the movable cover 40 is configured to deflect the airflow passing through the vent opening 34 upward as indicated by arrow D.

[0053] During operation of the vehicle 1, airflow is generated by the propulsion of the vehicle along a travel path (not shown). The airflow flows over the depressed central surface of the front cowl 6 to effectively cool the amplifier 24 disposed thereon. Air also flows through the air intake openings 35 into the fuel cell holder 29 and onto the batteries 27.

[0054] Air is drawn at least partially by the fan 31 into the fuel cell holder 29, as indicated by arrow A1 in Figure 7, to cool the fuel cell unit 30. If the movable cover 40 is in the open position, air is discharged through the vent opening 34 toward the fuel tanks 25, as indicated by arrow B in Figure 7 and arrow E in Figure 11. If, however, the movable cover 40 is in one of the plurality of deflection positions, the airflow is directed upward toward the seat 3, as indicated by arrow D, to warm a rider, for example, while the vehicle is operated in cold weather.

[0055] Air also enters through the intake openings 35 disposed frontward of the batteries 27, as indicated by arrows A2 in Figure 7, to effectively cool the batteries 27. The partition walls 28 guide the cool air over the batteries 27 and prevent the cool air from mixing with the warm air flowing through the vent opening 34 toward the fuel tanks 25 (see arrow B in Figure 7 or E in Figure 11).

[0056] The fuel cell 30, batteries 27, and fuel tanks 25 are surrounded by the loading platform receiving frame 14, which provides sufficient protection from external forces. Positioning the batteries 27 on both sides of the fuel tanks at the right and left sides of the vehicle body 2 advantageously enhances weight balance and simplifies maintenance of the batteries 27. Additionally, the partition walls 28 between the fuel tanks 25 and the batteries 27 advantageously reinforce the vehicle body frame 2a and protect the fuel tanks 25. Similarly, the partition wall 33 between the fuel cell holder 29

and the fuel tanks 25 reinforces the vehicle body frame 2a and protects the fuel cell unit 30 and the fuel tanks 25.

[0057] With respect to Figures 12a and 12b, other layouts of the fuel tanks 25 in accordance with other embodiments of the electric motor-operated vehicle are illustrated therein.

[0058] As illustrated in the top plan view of Figure 12a, the fuel tanks 25 can be oriented such that the longitudinal axis of the fuel tanks 25 are at an angle to the longitudinal axis of the vehicle body 2 while the fuel tanks 25 remain parallel to the riding surface of the vehicle 1. The fuel tanks 25 can also be inclined at an angle relative to the riding surface of the vehicle 1, as shown in Figure 12b.

[0059] Orientation of the fuel tanks 25 parallel to the longitudinal axis of the vehicle body 2 results in efficient use of the internal space of the vehicle body 2, and allows an increased number of fuel tanks 25 to fit on the vehicle body 2. An overall increase in fuel tank 25 capacity is thus achieved. Alternatively, orientation of the fuel tanks 25 at an angle to the longitudinal axis of the vehicle body 2 allows a per tank increase in fuel tank 25 capacity.

[0060] With reference to Figure 13, a piping system in accordance with the preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0061] A first and second fuel supply port 41, 42 are disposed at one end of a fuel pipe 43 and removably connected to the pipe 43. The fuel pipe 43 can be made, for example, but without limitation, of steel or another metal. Each of the fuel supply ports 41, 42 comprises a check valve (not shown). The ports 41, 42 are configured to connect to a fuel supply (not shown) to introduce fuel into the fuel pipe 43 through the ports 41, 42.

[0062] The fuel pipe 43 also connects to the fuel tanks 25 through a check valve 44 disposed inline with the pipe 43. A fuel supply inlet mechanism 45 connected to an inlet of each fuel tank 25 comprises a valve, which is preferably a manually operated valve. A relief pipe connects to and branches off from the fuel pipe 43, preferably between the fuel tanks 25. The relief pipe connects to a relief valve 46 configured to provide pressure relief to the fuel pipe 43 and components connected to the fuel pipe 43. A fuel drawing pipe 47 connects to and branches off from the fuel pipe 43, preferably between the fuel tanks 25 and a fuel filter 48 disposed inline with the fuel pipe 43. The fuel filter 48 is disposed between the fuel tanks 25 and the fuel cell unit 30. A pressure

regulator 49, a shut-off valve 50, and a flowmeter 51 are disposed inline with the fuel pipe 43 between the fuel filter 48 and the fuel cell unit 30. The shut-off valve 50 is preferably an automatic valve configured to open when the fuel cell unit 30 operates, and configured to close when the fuel cell unit 30 is not in use or under abnormal conditions, such as, but not limited to, low pressure. The fuel pipe 43 connects the flowmeter 51 to the fuel cell unit 30.

[0063] The fuel cell unit 30 receives air through an air supply pipe 52 connected to the fuel cell unit 30. An air pump 53, preferably disposed inline with the air supply pipe 52, pumps air into the fuel cell unit 30, as indicated by arrow F. A drainpipe 54 also connects to the fuel cell unit 30 and is configured to drain water produced by the fuel cell unit 30, as indicated by arrow G, during operation of the fuel cell unit 30. The fuel cell unit 30 connects to the amplifier 24, which is configured to step-up the DC voltage generated by the fuel cell unit 30. The amplifier 24 connects to the batteries 27 to supply the voltage generated by the fuel cell unit 30, which the batteries then supply to the motor control unit 37 to control the operation of the electric motor 36.

[0064] With reference to Figures 14 and 15, the layout of the piping system on the vehicle body frame 2a in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0065] In the illustrated embodiment, the fuel supply ports 41, 42 are disposed rearward of the cross member 12 and below the loading platform 9. The fuel pipe 43 is disposed between the left and right side rails 14a, 14b of the loading platform receiving frame 14. The fuel pipe 43 preferably extends at least partially in a direction generally parallel to the side rails 14a, 14b and at least partially in a direction generally perpendicular to the side rails 14a, 14b so as to surround the fuel tanks 25 but maintain an adequate distance from the fuel tanks 25. The fuel supply inlet mechanism 45 of each fuel tank 25 faces the front end of the vehicle body 2.

[0066] As illustrated in Figure 15, the layout of the fuel pipe 43 comprises a plurality of upward and downward bends. Such bends are configured to increase the flexibility of the piping system to absorb vibration and to secure the fuel pipe 43 to the vehicle body frame 2a in a stabilized manner.

[0067] With reference to Figures 16 and 17, the location of the fuel cell drainpipe 54 according to a preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0068] In the illustrated embodiment, the drainpipe 54 is disposed centrally along a longitudinal axis of the fuel cell unit 30, said longitudinal axis extending between lateral ends of the fuel cell unit 30. The drainpipe 54 extends rearward and downward from the fuel cell unit 30 and comprises a drain pipe 54 exit preferably disposed below the main frame rails 7. The drainpipe 54 can be made, for example, but without limitation, of a plastic material.

[0069] During operation of the vehicle 1, the fuel cell unit 30 receives fuel from the fuel tanks 25 through the fuel pipe 43. The fuel cell unit 30 also receives air through the air supply pipe 52. The fuel cell unit 30 generates electricity and water. The water is discharged at a central location beneath the vehicle body 2 through the drainpipe 54. The location of the drainpipe 54 advantageously allows water from the fuel cell unit 30 to be discharged between the plurality of wheels 5, 8. Accordingly, the wheels 5, 8 are less likely to run over the discharged water, resulting in a vehicle 1 that operates in a more stabilized manner. The amplifier 24 steps up the voltage generated by the fuel cell unit 30 before transmitting it to the battery 27 to charge the battery 27. The battery transmits power to the motor control unit 37, which controls the operation of the electric motor 36 to propel the vehicle 1. The fuel ports 41, 42 are advantageously disposed under the loading platform 9, which protects the ports 41, 42 from external forces.

[0070] With reference to Figure 18, an alternate layout of the piping system in accordance with a second preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0071] In the illustrated embodiment, the fuel supply inlet mechanisms 45 of each fuel tank 25 faces the rear end of the vehicle body 2, so that the overall length of the fuel pipe 43 is shortened. The shortened fuel pipe 43 is configured to provide a smoother fuel flow. As discussed above, the fuel pipe 43 preferably extends at least partially in a direction generally parallel to the side rails 14a, 14b and at least partially in a direction generally perpendicular to the side rails 14a, 14b. The fuel pipe 43 also comprises a plurality of bends (not shown) configured to provide the fuel pipe 43 with flexibility for absorbing vibration, and to reduce flow resistance.

[0072] With reference to Figures 19 and 20, a layout of components in accordance with a third preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0073] In the illustrated embodiment, the fuel cell unit 30 is disposed in front of the seat 3. The front end of the fuel tanks 25 extends under the seat 3 so that the fuel tanks 25 can have a larger size with a greater fuel holding capacity. The increased fuel tank 25 capacity in the illustrated embodiment makes possible an increase in the travel range of the vehicle 1 per tank of fuel.

[0074] With reference to Figures 21 and 22, a layout of components in accordance with a fourth preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0075] In the illustrated embodiment, the fuel cell unit 30 is disposed between the fuel tanks 25 and the electric motor 36. The front end of the fuel tanks 25 extends under the seat 3 so that the fuel tanks 25 can have a larger size with a greater fuel holding capacity. The increased fuel tank 25 capacity in the illustrated embodiment makes possible an increase in the travel range of the vehicle 1 per tank of fuel.

[0076] With reference to Figures 23 and 24, a layout of components in accordance with a fifth preferred embodiment of the electric motor-operated vehicle is illustrated therein.

[0077] In the illustrated embodiment, the fuel cell unit 30 is disposed between the fuel tanks 25 and the motor control unit 37, and above the electric motor 36. The front ends of the fuel tanks 25 extend under the seat 3 and the rear ends extend rearward so that the fuel tanks 25 can have an even larger size with an even greater fuel holding capacity. The increased fuel tank 25 capacity in the illustrated embodiment makes possible an increase in the travel range of the vehicle 1 per tank of fuel.

[0078] Although the present invention has been described in terms of certain embodiments, other embodiments apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art also are within the scope of this invention. Thus, various changes and modifications may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. For instance, various components may be repositioned as desired. Moreover, not all of the features, aspects and advantages are necessarily required to practice the present invention. Accordingly, the scope of the present invention is intended to be defined only by the claims that follow.